

Iraq: 'The Gate of God Opens Wider'.

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It is two years since the illegal invasion, destruction of humanity's history, the subsequent slaughters, the attempt to dehumanize Iraqis, the people of Mesopotamia which brought the world all we call civilized. A people whose deaths, in the words of the inimitable Major General Mark Kimmitt, 'it is not productive to count' and who, when asked about US carnage in the cradle of civilization responded 'change the channel ...'

For those of us unable to 'change the channel', the beauty, the generosity and the horrors of Iraq's suffering under embargo and occupation will for ever haunt. As will the literal and cultural rape of a nation from Mosul to Basra in the lie of 'liberation'. 'History will judge ..' said Britain's Prime Minister Blair, President Bush's bag carrier in his 'crusade'. History will indeed judge. The words of Denis Halliday come to mind - the former UN Assistant Secretary General and UN Co-ordinator in Iraq who resigned in disgust at the 'genocide' of the embargo - 'history will slaughter those responsible' he said of the sanctions, a 'slaughter' which equally eloquently applies to America's temporary coup - and abduction of a sovereign government whose status was guaranteed by the U.N. - in the 'land between two rivers'. It is two years since Iraq's Year Zero.

The lies, misleadings, ignorance in high places, which led to this historic cultural and human holocaust are outside the scope of an article but many books will bear witness at the grave where truth lies. As Alexander and Patrick Cockburn point out in their revealing book 'Saddam Hussein, an American Obsession', in 1991, not one US official involved in policy making or advice over Iraq had ever set foot in Iraq. Exactly the same applied in 2003 - neither Britain nor the US had an Embassy there since August 1990, they were reliant on duplicitous defectors all with their own agenda and middle aged Iraqis who had left as children. Little has changed. As British and American policy makers squat in Iraq's great state buildings - an illegal takeover under the Geneva Convention - they are helicoptered in and out and have no clue as to conditions in which Iraqis live, or access to what Iraqis are thinking. Ignorance is so total that it was only little over a month ago that a policy has been broadly adopted to employ Iraqi interpreters - those brave enough - rather than American born Arabs, since 'Iraqis recognise dialects from the region and can tell if someone is of a different nationality or region in Iraq'. This astonishing bit of finally acquired knowledge is presumably accompanied by another total ignorance - an assumption that if someone comes from somewhere else they are automatically a 'terrorist'.

The tragic folly of Iraq though, is a litany of ignorance of a 'far away place..' of which Washington knows nothing. Returning to London from Baghdad, days before the invasion, newspapers were awash with Ahmed Chalabi's assurances that the crusaders would be greeted with flowers and sweets. The certainties from a man who should be serving a lengthy jail term in Jordan for embezzlement, would be taken by inhabitants of planet earth with a hefty pinch of salt. Not apparently in Washington or Whitehall. The thought that

perhaps representatives of governments who had been responsible for thirteen years of grinding sanctions misery and humiliation, a welcome as invaders might not be forthcoming, appears to have escaped policy makers. On the day of the invasion a respected politician with deep love for and knowledge of the Middle East telephoned, appalled, 'Are you aware' he asked 'that the British tanks and vehicles have entered Iraq flying the St George's flag' - the Crusaders flag. I drew breath in double horror - the invasion had begun and it WAS a crusade. I thought of the refrain over the thirteen years of sanctions, heard again and again in Iraq 'nothing so terrible has happened to us since the crusades ...' but the British, we are told endlessly, are more subtle than the Americans - they wore soft hats. They also 'had experience in Belfast', that running sore on British soil, caused by the division of Ireland by Winston Churchill - a line on the granite, almost at the same time as Britain's Sir Percy Cox drew 'the line in the sand' in southern Iraq changing the region's topography before further colonial meddlings. What 'experience in Belfast', over approaching four decades of grief and mayhem there, has to do with Basra, a cultural world away, is perhaps just unfolding - with more of the same.

I wonder if the British and American soldiers - torturers and non torturers alike - in Basra are aware of that battered, beautiful city's suffering.' If there was a war between France and Germany, Basra would be bombed' is a wry Basra refrain. Until it was looted at the time of the invasion, there was a museum commemorating the lost of the eight year Iran-Iraq war in Basra. The impossibly small uniform of the ten year old civil defense volunteer - yes ten years old, almost all the men had been sent to fight - killed trying to rescue the injured. The young doctor with great, warm eyes looking from a fading photograph, his bloodied shirt laid in the glass case below. The hundreds, upon hundreds of identity cards on the walls, names, photos, addresses, ages - the lost loves, lives, dreams of another western fuelled conflict.

Have any of the modern day barbarians who have destroyed the worlds wonders, Babylon, Kufa, Najav, Kerbala, Samarra and the resultant destruction of the golden Malwiya minaret - 1,155 years old which actually survived the Monguls, but not this illegal onslaught - pondered at all. Did they gaze even momentarily in awed wonder at the great ziggurat of Abraham's believed birth place, Ur, before spraying it with graffiti and erecting a base over unexcavated archeological sites which were incalculably ancient before Christ and the Prophet Mohammed - peace and blessings be upon Him - walked in this region. Did they hesitate in wonder at the hundred mosques, their great golden and turquoise domes glinting in the sun, before they went on their rampage in Falluja with equal disregard for humanity or history. Does the great mosque in Mosul where the Prophet Johah is believed buried still stand unsullied - and is the poignant monastery perched on its mountain top nearby, where Saint Matthew is believed to lie still stand. We are told many pray before operations. As they read their bibles, did any reflect on the verse from the book of Revelations before Babylon was laid to waste for a second time. 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down ... We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. ...'

The answer to the above is almost certainly that these world's wonders, as the manuscripts, the museums, were wasted on the world's most powerful army and its unwilling 'coalition'. Recently, a colleague who has lived for many years in the Middle East spent an 'embedded' period with the US Army in Iraq. On a Friday morning the unit he was with decided to raid a home on a 'tip off' regarding an 'insurgent'. As they set off, the call to prayer rang across the area. The senior officer remarked he hated the sound which brings peace to the heart of believers and non believers who travel the Middle East. Determined not to be drawn, my friend said mildly 'Well, remember, it is the Sabbath'. 'What do you mean it is the Sabbath,'

was the reply 'it's Friday.' How long have you been here', 'two years', said the officer. Oh, and the home which was virtually destroyed. 'Wrong house, wrong information.'

On April 9th 2003, I went to see a friend, a former Professor at the University of Mosul. Usually a cool, clear headed thinker, always on the move, she was sitting frantically flicking through the television channels, watching the destruction of her land – suddenly Mosul was shown, the looting of the museum, the university, the carnage, the chaos – ' No, oh no, my town, my home, my university ...' she was inconsolable in her helplessness and grief. As the American flag covered the statue of Saddam Hussein's face and it fell, she was physically sick – not because she was pro the regime, but because it represented the beginning of the destruction by invaders of Iraq's very sovereignty, the stripping of modern and ancient history – and lack of any cultural sensitivity or understanding.

I thought of standing on my hotel balcony a short time before, taking roll after roll of film as the azure and peach Baghdad dawn shimmered in reflection in the Tigris, knowing I would never see Baghdad like this again – then being consoled in the lobby by the proprietor as the tears ran down my face on the eve of war 'don't worry Madam Felicity, don't be upset, we will be alright, we will be alright ...' In Amman, Sattar, the engineer turned driver during the embargo years, looked at me for once speechless, we knew – and there were no words. In the years coming into Iraq from Amman we would slap palms together when we hit the sign which displayed Fallujah, Damascus – and 'Baghdad Central', after 1,200 grinding kms, we had nearly made it. So far, Damascus still stands.

But for all the horrors, illegality, destruction, shame on the invaders and collective shame shared by so many, there is something Iraq will never lose as expressed hauntingly by Paul William Roberts. i. In Baghdad, he writes, he sees

' the old people with resignation stamped across their foreheads, who can't go on yet will go on; the young married couples who still hope for a better life yet don't hope too hard lest it break their hearts, the countless unremembered acts of kindness and of love that fill desolate days, and I realize I would far prefer to be here than in any house where this war is justified. For it cannot be justified.

But this region has always led to somewhere worth going. Baghdad is just as glorious in its ruin as it was in its glory, for something noble crawls from the rubble to spread golden wings in the light of dawn. The Gate of God opens wider.'

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Note

1. Paul William Roberts book on Iraq 'A War Against Truth', was short listed for this year's Charles Taylor Prize for best nonfiction.

Felicity Arbuthnot is a Global Research Contributing Editor. Her carefully documented reports from the Iraqi war theater not only have provided evidence of the war crimes committed by occupying forces, they reveal the ongoing humanitarian crisis and the plight of an entire nation and its people.

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